

Co-operation and education

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Tom Woodin (ed.) *Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values: Contemporary Issues in Education*, London: Routledge, 2014, £29.99 paperback (978-0-415-72524-8), 219pp.

Organised co-operation has the power to transform inadequate and oppressive social situations, and to enable collective human flourishing – such is the first impression made by this important collection of essays on co-operation and education. The book offers windows onto the rich diversity of co-operative practices that have historically created, nurtured and defended conditions in which non-capitalist and pro-democratic forms of learning can flourish. We meet co-operativism here as a powerful international movement that was influential in advancing social justice throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that remains ambitious, hopeful and alive in the twenty-first.

Yet the book also expresses a deep sense of crisis and embattlement as co-operators struggle to survive and change the stifling new parameters of possibility which have been created through neoliberal policy making and cultural politics since the 1980s, particularly in education. Tim Brighouse neatly summarises the fundamental problem posed by all the authors: that ‘a world of post-war trust and co-operative idealism where each – central and local politician, teacher, parent and administrator – played their part, has disintegrated into a largely atomised system where national politicians have put their faith in a “market” of schooling’ (p. 195). This world is actively hostile to co-operative values and principles. In it, democratic educational cultures, practices and institutions are nevertheless proliferating and succeeding despite being rendered invisible by mainstream educational discourses. And, according to these authors, it is a world that co-operative educational and political movements can overhaul.

Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values is a solid and interesting book that lays bare some mechanics of this vision; it is essential reading for anyone interested in the contemporary relationship between education and co-operation in the UK. It is well-written, enjoyable to read, politically provocative and informed by both research and practice; the collected bibliographies would make an excellent syllabus for any autodidact or teacher interested in the theme. The authors straddle theory and practice in the (mainly British) co-operative movement and represent perspectives from compulsory, informal, further and higher education as teachers, head teachers, academics, education commissioners and policy makers, consultants, independent researchers and social and political activists. This (relatively) ‘broad church of practices’ is also deployed to introduce contested issues in the co-operative movement in education, and in doing so invites us to interrogate our own educational politics, intellectual and political alliances, and beliefs about strategies for and processes of social change. The following review offers a description of the chapters, a consideration of common themes and tensions across them, and reflections on the book’s wider implications.

The arguments in brief

The book is organised into three sections: frameworks for co-operative education, case studies and research from co-operative schools, and contemporary work on co-operative education in co-operatives and higher education. Woodin’s introduction situates these within a context of entrenched neoliberal discourse and policy and presents co-operativism as a formidable institutional formation which can confront this hegemony with ‘countervailing force’. The chapters develop and

affirm this argument by exemplifying co-operative work across a range of educational contexts.

The 'frameworks' section opens with a passionate critique of competition in education as 'a betrayal that should be exposed and opposed with all the vigour and resolve we can muster' (a position questioned by Tim Brighouse in his final reflections, pp. 195-200). This is followed by an illustration of how structures for 'democratic experimentalism' were created in one 'secondary modern' school in London during the 1940s and 1950s (Fielding, pp. 17-30). Richard Pring then makes a case that co-operative institutional partnerships between schools, colleges, youth services, voluntary bodies and employers may reverse the 'disintegration' of public education. After presenting examples of such work done in further education partnerships with teachers and local education authorities during the 1960s and 1970s, he argues that we can infuse the renewal of such projects with support and vision from the co-operative movement (pp. 31-41). The section concludes with a philosophical consideration of how to distinguish between forms of co-operation that lead to marginalisation and assimilation and those that constitute autonomous challenges to hegemonic norms and social forces (Woods, pp. 42-54).

The section on co-operation and schools is replete with examples drawn from contemporary practice and research. Gail Davidge, Keri Facer and John Schostak helpfully explain why co-operation in schools is so political and why education has been central to co-operative movements since the nineteenth century. They also pose an uncomfortable proposition: that while we have 'the legal instruments, will and resources' to challenge neoliberal education, we have been less successful at cultivating radically democratic alternative social visions and people to realise and promote them (pp. 57-73). The challenges of this work are clarified by Sarah Jones's reflection on the persistence of 'contrived collegiality' in co-operative teacher professional development in an urban co-operative secondary academy. Her critique of hierarchy, individualism, conservatism and 'presentism' (a form of instrumental rationality) even in very successful co-operative organisations concludes with an argument that genuine collegiality is 'unrealistic' within the current educational system, but not without provoking us to consider its possibilities and intimating the desirability of more radical structural change (pp. 74-86). Ashley Simpson's reflections on coming to political consciousness as a student in England's first co-operative school, however, remind us what is possible within this challenging context: emancipatory learning as a means for effecting wider

social change in radically democratic ways (pp. 87-98). When embedded into educational cultures so that schools 'create, model and perform justice', co-operative values work against both the closures of short-termism and competition and the injurious effects of traditional definitions of knowledge and 'failure' (Brockington, pp. 99-111). Legitimacy is given to languages of values-based education; hegemonic discourses of targets, markets and competition are disrupted; young people, teachers and communities are empowered to take part in political decision-making; and authoritarian tendencies are replaced by more horizontal political philosophies and processes (Woodin, pp. 112-127).

While the rapid growth of co-operative trust schools and academies in England testifies to an interest in co-operative compulsory education, the movement is more incipient in further and higher education. There are localised projects but fewer models of existing institutions; Stephen Yeo cautions that opportunities to wedge co-operative values between public higher education and neo-liberalising processes have been lost to the defence of academic privilege and a desire to create parallel structures rather than struggle to place higher education in truly public trust (pp. 141-146). Yet he, like the other authors in the book, believes it is possible to create autonomous, open and collectively owned forms of organisation for the production and distribution of research knowledge – whether they look like 'colleges' or 'universities' or not. The fragmentation of the higher educational system is creating opportunities for more diverse formations of co-operation in higher and informal education (Shaw, pp. 161-176); in Scotland, there have been large projects to integrate co-operativism into higher education curriculum reform in relation to co-operative enterprise and employment (McDonnell and MacKnight, pp. 147-160). But if Ian MacPherson was right that co-operativism remains 'ignored or patronised' in the academy, then academics may have a lot of work in front of them to transform co-operative studies into a legitimate field of scholarly knowledge and practice (p. 177).

The politics and possibilities of co-operation in education

Regardless of whether co-operative studies advances itself as an academic field, this book makes a persuasive argument that co-operative values and organisational forms are resources for resisting neoliberal hegemony and creating humane, democratic and egalitarian educational institutions. This is hard to deny, given the evidence presented

from successful projects, many of them large in scale (despite weak support for claims of causal relation between co-operative models and certain kinds of educational outcomes, which is partly a consequence of their irrelevance and partly due to the brevity of the chapters). The authors map an organisational landscape of steady co-operative structures and distil their own challenges of working in schools, universities and social movements, thus offering practical ports of call for teachers, students, parents and administrators seeking alternatives to the status quo.

I suspect that the greatest challenges emerging around co-operative movements in education today actually remain rooted in the deeper tensions that exist within and between the chapters. For example, the authors unanimously assert that co-operative movement is a struggle for politico-economic change through cultural transformation, and thus prioritise the 'embedding' of co-operative values, the practice of co-operative principles and the formation of co-operative subjects. However, many seem ambivalent about the adequacy of this strategy for confronting deep neoliberalism and some offer considered explanations of their satisfaction with less substantial forms of change. While it is not the place of this book to determine what constitutes 'democratic experimentalism', critical pragmatism or a retreat from the radical democratic project, the question is pressing.

Equally, the authors engage in debates about the relationship between co-operativism, socialism and the state but tiptoe around the relationship between co-operation, capitalism, and anti- and post-capitalism. Dissensus seems both active and unnamed. One wonders how far intellectual and political alliances can (or should) stretch between those who define co-operation as an inherently anti-capitalist social form and those who regard it as a better way of organising capital relations; lines are drawn and dialogues must ensue around issues of ownership, democracy and control. Again, this book does not attempt a resolution but provides thoughtful grounding for debate.

There are two areas that I hope are being developed elsewhere, as they are not satisfied within the book. One is a systematic study of the theoretical underpinnings of different interpretations of co-operative values and principles, and an analysis of their implications for the co-operative construction of non-capitalist alternatives to neoliberal educational discourses and institutions of today. The roster of influence across chapters reads like a who's who of both critical theory and progressive education: Apple, Arendt, Arrighi, Bakunin, Benjamin, Bernstein, Dewey, Fraser, Gramsci,

Habermas, Kolb, Kropotkin, Laclau, Machiavelli, Marx, Mouffe, Piaget, Thompson and Williams. While there is a strong – and, one senses, loyal – recognition of the formative influences of the co-operative movement's values, principles and experiences, it would be helpful to learn more about how these are being reinterpreted now through these different theoretical lenses and to conceptualise co-operation's place within (or absence from) integrated critical theories of democratic education.

This is significant for developing another area for development: diversity, difference and anti-oppression in co-operative work. It is recognised that women and ethnic minorities remain subordinated in co-operative leadership (pp. 166, 168, 187) and that formal education today is plagued by entrenched 'overlapping and debilitating forms of inequality based on social differences including class, race, disability, sexuality and gender' – injustices that we know from other research are exacerbated by neoliberal policies (p. 203). Yet while five of the book's thirteen chapters are written by women and there is a chapter focused especially on alternative forms of co-operation in the global South, theoretical inspiration remain heavily male and white, and diverse dimensions of social inequality play little role in the development of frameworks for co-operation in education or conceptualisations of co-operation itself. As in progressive politics generally, a rapprochement with feminist work and critical theories of intersectional difference and oppression still beckons.

Everything in this book points to the consolidation, already well underway, of an intellectual movement that can advance these and other lessons here and now and move us closer towards a future in which democratically theorised, organised and governed education ascends. It is rare that visions for radical social, economic and cultural change are accompanied by both rich histories of struggle and compelling examples of actually existing accomplishment; it is even rarer to find accounts of such possibilities that are convincing in a new educational order which specialises in cultivating despair. *Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values* is an antidote to this mystification and should be read widely by anyone seeking inspiration for their own visions and strategies for transforming education.